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### **Abstract**

The concept of empowerment is contextual, multidimensional and relational in nature. It could be defined as 'a person's capacity to make effective choices'. Nevertheless, women as a segment of population have been limited to use their capacity. However, there is radical increasing of women representation in Ethiopia (38.8 per cent representation on the 2015 election, with 11% increment). But, there is an increasing debate on the transformative potential of these descriptive (numeric) representation to substantial and symbolic representations of women. Therefore, this research was conducted to evaluate the transformative potential of the descriptive representation of women in the Ethiopia lower house, and to identify the current challenges on the effort of political empowerment of women in Ethiopia. Hence, using mixed research approach, qualitative and quantitative review literatures and reports were used to compile data. The findings indicated that, the current 'fast track' approach to increase the descriptive representation of women in Ethiopian lower house has limited substantive representation impact. This was evident for the past twenty years' disproportionate representation of women in the legislative body and executives (25.9% difference) and the representation of women in the executive has been dominantly in the 'weak positions'. Thus, the state in Ethiopia is continued to control the agency of women. The election system and lack of freedom women's associations can enjoy; lack of clear gender policy approach and budget; the restrictive rules on civil society which bans involvement of civil society on gender issue are undermining women's potential to challenge the unbalanced power relationships. Thus, the finding of this study suggests, the government of Ethiopia should emphasize on the 'incremental' approach to bring substantive representation of women and give freedom to independent progressive women's groups to have effective choices and influence decision making.

**Key Words:** Women, Empowerment, Representation, Transformative, Descriptive, Substantive

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of empowerment is contextual, multidimensional and relational in nature (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). It could be widely defined as "a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005: 6). Women as a segment of population have been limited to use their potential as equal to their counterparts and empowering women is becoming a conventional wisdom.

However, policies and interventions to achieve political empowerment of women particularly in developing nations is facing challenges. Nevertheless, there is radical increasing of women representation in legislative bodies in Africa which reached 23.2 percent in 2016 from 9.8 percent in 1995 (IPU, 2016).

Likewise, Ethiopia in the 2015 election proceeded the 30+ per cent targeted by Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) which reached 38.8 percent women representative in the lower house by 11 per cent increment from the last election term (IPU, 2016; Arriola and Lyons, 2016). This grows debate on the transformative potential of these descriptive representation to substantial and symbolic representation of women.

The descriptive representation is defined as "[...] individual represents a group by the virtue of sharing similar characteristics with the group such as race, sex, age, ethnicity or geographical

area” (DWA, 2005: 9). Thus, descriptive representation could be evaluated by counting the representative of women in parliament or decision making body without evaluating what the representative are doing (DWA, 2005; Bauer and Burnet, 2013).

Whereas substantive representation is “[w]here the individual seeks to advance a particular group’s policy preferences and interests, without necessarily being a member of the group as defined by race, sex, ethnicity, etc.”(DWA, 2005: 9). Therefore, the representation of women in the substantive representation goes ‘beyond numbers’ and demands to present and influence policies on the interest and needs of women (DWA, 2005; Bauer and Burnet, 2013).

Both the descriptive and substantive representation could play a role to increase the role of women symbolic representation as a role model for future generations (Bauer and Burnet, 2013).

However, there are nations incorporating women in to their parliament and different political positions without changing and challenging the unequal gender relations in the community and improving the status of women (DWA, 2005; Bauer and Burnet, 2013, Ansoms and Debusscher, 2013).

These countries descriptive representation as taking as ‘fast track’ approach instead of ‘incremental approach’ which is elaborated by Bauer and Burnet as “[...] waiting for cultural, political and socioeconomic developments over time [...]” (Bauer and Burnet, 2013: 103). Thus, this paper examines the transformative potentials of the descriptive representation of women in Ethiopia and to identify the current challenges on the effort of political empowerment of women.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

The capacities to make effective choice (empowerment) is determined by two factors of agency and opportunity structure (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). Agency is defined as “[...] an actor’s ability to make meaningful choices; that is, the actor is able to envisage options and make a choice” and opportunity structure is defined as the “formal and informal contexts within which actors operate” (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005: 6).

With this concept in mind, women are encouraged to participate in politics to develop their agency to influence decision-making. However, there is a ‘paradox’: an increasing in number of women in parliament results in a lower influence in decision-making and policy making (Burnet 2008; Bauer and Burnet; 2013), Burnet is however optimist with the initiatives of these quota system in the long run to bring substantive and symbolic effect in genuine democratic system as have been seen in the Nordic countries (countries with more than 40% women representative in their parliaments) (Burnet 2008; Bauer and Burnet; 2013). However, others scholars are more pessimistic regarding the long term prospects of ‘integration’ through quota, namely that the ‘transformative potential’ women’s and civil societies voice ability to set agenda is minimal in an authoritarian state (Debusscher and Ansoms, 2013).

Likewise, in the case of Ethiopia the increasing numeric (descriptive) which reached 38.8 per cent women representative in the lower house by 11 per cent increment from the last election term is considered as success stories (Okumo and Assefa, 2014; Kassa, 2015). Therefore, this study intended to contribute into the growing debate on the transformative potential of the increasing trend of descriptive representation in developing nation by evaluating the case of Ethiopia’s transformative potential of the current ‘fast track’ approach which resulted 11% rate of increment in the lower house of Ethiopia in the 2015 election.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To evaluate the transformative potential of the descriptive representation of women in the Ethiopia lower house, and
- To identify the current challenges on the effort of political empowerment of women in Ethiopia.

### 4. Materials and Methods

With an emphasis on qualitative research approach, the study employed a mixed research approach. Both quantitative and qualitative secondary data sources were used. Review literatures of different research, international and national official reports and policies were used to compile and analysis data.

### 5. Results and Discussions

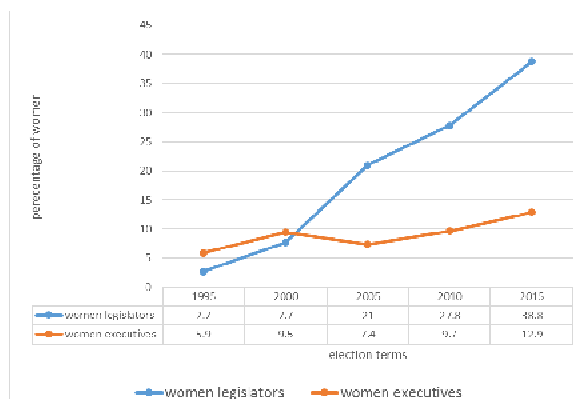
#### 5.1 Political Empowerment and Representation of Women in Ethiopia

Alike to the most sub-Saharan Africa countries, Ethiopian women participation on the lower house increased from 2.7per cent in the 1995 to38.8per cent in 2015 election (see figure 1) (IPU, 2016). This is a plus result from the target of the BPA 30+ per cent mandate of nations. This result was gained from the 30 per cent candidate quota set by the ruling party(Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) (Okumo and Assefa, 2014; Kassa, 2015), and 40 per cent nomination of women for the election by the party, but the participation of women as candidate was only 23 per cent (IPU, 2016).

Ethiopia is a signatory of the major gender equality related conventions and treats in the international and regional levels. However, the implantationis poor and ratification of some of the binding convections such as Optional Protocolon CEDAW is not done yet (Tefera, 2010).

Though, by lobbying the state women groups able to succeed on revising discriminatory family and civil laws, women's policy was formulated in 1993 and at the same time women's office under the prime minister was open in the same year. Subsequent Gender Action Plan and differ guidelines were prepared to empower women and achieve gender equality (Embet, 2010, Okumo and Assefa, 2014; Kassa, 2015, UN, 2016). However, with these measures women political empowerment, decision making, and influencing policies and laws that affect their lives is very low (Tefera, 2010; UN, 2014). Even up to 2005 upgrading of the Women's Affairs Office (WAO) to Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and later to Minister of Women, Children and Youth (MWCY), the Women's Affairs Offices in national and regional level which mandated to follow-up gender mainstreaming practices were not members of the decision-making cabinets (Emebet, 2010; Tefera, 2010). Thus, women were denied to present their needs and participate in decision-making that affect their lives, but the first step to empower people is to give 'opportunity' to choice and then use of the opportunity and outcomes could be expected (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005: 7).

Figure 1. Comparison of women's participation on the legislative and executive bodies on the five election terms in Ethiopia



Source: organized from Okumo and Assefa, 2014; UN, 2014; IPU, 2016)

However, as the above figure shows that, the parliament representation of women in Ethiopia dramatically increased in the past twenty years from 2.7 per cent in 1995 to 38.8 per cent in 2015. However, their participation in the executive 5.9 per cent in 1995 to 12.9 per cent in 2015 shows not significant change (only 7% increasing in twenty years) comparing with legislatures body representation of women shows 25.9 per cent difference and representation of women in the executive has been also dominantly in the 'weak positions'. The weak positions include the Ministries on Women, Children and Youth Affairs; Social and Labor Affairs, Transport and Tourism; and Science and Technology (Bauer and Burnet, 2013).

## **5.2 Current Challenges to Ethiopian Women's Political Empowerment**

### **The Election System**

The voting system is found to be obstacle for women in Ethiopia, where majoritarian (whereby the house of peoples' representatives is elected on the basis of the majority of votes cast in single member constituencies) instead of proportional representing system was employed in Ethiopia (Tefera, 2010: 12-13). Showing how the South African women were successfully represented in the parliament through proportional representing and mandatory quota system employed on each political party, Tefera (2010) argue that South Africa is one of the success stories on this regard.

Agarwal (1997) argue that, state has agency to undermine women's potential on the way state handle 'gender-progressive' women's organizations, being such organization demands progressive change on certain laws and practice, this might lead to conflict of interests. But, being the state has the power to enact laws and policies in favor of women which could be source of cooperation (Agarwal, 1997: 32). However, the state could also use [...] its resources and coercive apparatus to reinforce existing gender-retrogressive biases within the family and community, constituting a situation of conflict (Agarwal, 1997: 32). This is undergoing on the measures of the state in Ethiopia after the 'shock' of the 2005 elections, in which opposition parties won nearly a third of parliamentary seats, the regime stepped up its efforts to harass opponents, using both legal and extralegal means (Arriola and Lyons, 2016: 77).

### **Lack of Civil Societies Involvement in Gender Issues**

On the principle of 'weakening' of civil society as a condition to consolidate the developmental state, a controversial 'Charities and Societies Proclamation' was introduced in 2009 (Matfess, 2015; Meressa, 2015) Under the new civil society law, "[...] any nongovernmental organization that receives more than 10 per cent of its funding from outside the country's borders is considered 'foreign'. Any foreign NGO is banned from engaging in work pertaining to human rights, women's rights, children's rights, disability rights, citizenship rights, or democratic governance" (Matfess, 2015: 193). This law affected progressive women's organization which claimed their independence from the government's budget and were working in advocating women's right using budget from their personal contribution and dominantly supported by foreign non-governmental organizations (Meressa, 2015). This is a diverging-path that some of the initiatives of the government with its opening to democracy which helped different progressive women associations attempt to advocate for the right of women and the constitutional and different policy initiatives that could be supported by such women's organization are failing (Meressa, 2015; Matfess, 2015). Rather political affiliated women's associations, league, forum and federations were organized by the state to pretend as civil society (Meressa, 2015).

### **Lack of Budget and Commitment**

Lack of budget both from the government to support some of the policies with gender budget and the restriction introduced by the government on the gender progressive groups not to access financial support from abroad (Meressa, 2015; Matfess, 2015) are continuing to limit the agency of women to empower themselves (Meressa, 2015). In addition to this, lack of clearly established constitutional gender quotas (Okumo and Assefa, 2014), lack of political commitment to have clear



and consistent policy on how to incorporate women in higher decision-making and implantation of gender mainstreaming (Embet, 2010; Tefera, 2010; Meresa, 2015) are factors hindering women's political empowerment.

The current tendency of increasing of the representation of women in the lower house (which reached 38.8 per cent) by voluntary quota system might be taken as 'fast-track' substituting the 'incremental approach' (waiting for cultural, political and socioeconomic developments over time). Therefore, in a country where the executive is strong than the legislators the descriptive representation will have limited substantive representation impact, as have been seen in Rwanda (Bauer and Burnet, 2013). However, by giving democratic rights for women to organize and discuss issues that matter them, changes even without descriptive representation could be achieved, this was evident in the case of Botswana which Bauer and Burnet stated that "substantive representation without descriptive representation" which symbolic and substantive effects achieved by women's movement and lobbying (Bauer and Burnet, 2013: 107).

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Ethiopian women are highly affected by the long history of monocracy and deep-rooted patriarchy. However, the patriarchal relation is in motion of change and women have an agency to change the unequal gender relationships with support of intra-household and extra-household factors which includes the state. Though, the current state in Ethiopia introduced women's policy (1993), incorporate gender issue on the constitution (1995) and designed different short term action plans, these policies and laws could not achieve substantive change in gender relations.

The current 'fast track' measures to increase the descriptive representation of women in Ethiopian lower house (38.8% women participation) by the ruling party voluntary quota system, where the executive is strong than the legislators will have limited substantive representation impact, as have been seen in Rwanda (Bauer and Burnet, 2013). This was also evident for the past twenty years' disproportionate representation of women in the legislative body and executives (25.9% difference) and representation of women in the executive has been also dominantly in the 'weak positions'. Thus, the state in Ethiopia is continued to control the agency (an actor's ability to make meaningful choices) of women. The election system and lack of freedom women's associations can enjoy; lack of clear gender policy approach and budget; the restrictive rules on civil society which bans involvement of civil society on gender issue are undermining women's potential to challenge the unbalance power relationships.

Therefore, the finding of this study suggests, the government of Ethiopia should emphasis the 'incremental' approach to bring substantive representation of women by improving the status of women and give freedom to independent progressive women's groups to have effective choices to influence decision making. Non-governmental organization should be allowed to involve on gender consciousness raising programs. The commitments entered, the laws and policies should be implemented with due concern to empower women and the quota system should be constitutionalized to be followed by all political parties.

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